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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [MK](#)  
SUBJECT: MACEDONIA'S CULTURE WARS

REF: A. 08 SKOPJE 120  
[1](#)B. 08 SKOPJE 273

Classified By: Ambassador Reeker for reasons 1.5 (B) and (d).

[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary: Coincidentally (or perhaps not), two church/state issues in Macedonia have grabbed the headlines and pitted PM Gruevski's VMRO government against the opposition and his own ethnic Albanian coalition partner, DUI. The GoM is aggressively pressing forward with its plans to fund the construction of a large Orthodox Christian church in the heart of Skopje's City Square, even as the e-Albanian community -- and many e-Macedonians -- are unhappy with the project. Meanwhile, Gruevski and his party have fiercely criticized the Constitutional Court's April 15 ruling that religious education in public schools is unconstitutional. The GoM has grudgingly stated that it will abide by this decision, but a move may be afoot to enshrine religious education in the constitution, thus bypassing the courts. These culture wars could exacerbate an already divided society even further; combined with an economic downturn and lack of progress toward Euro-Atlantic integration, there is real potential for political instability. End summary.

#### CHURCH ISSUE HEATS UP

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[1](#)2. (SBU) A much-publicized March 29 scuffle on Skopje's city square between demonstrators and counter-demonstrators clashing over government funding for a large Orthodox Christian church to be built there has refocused attention on this old issue (see reftels). PM Gruevski's VMRO, buoyed by its recent massive win in presidential and municipal elections, has put the pedal to the metal defending this plan, placing (clearly pricy) two-page color advertisements every day in Macedonian-language dailies for at least a week. As is par for the course here, the ads do not only defend the policy but serve as a convenient venue to attack the opposition Social Democrats (SDSM) and, by inference, to lump in all others who oppose the project as godless communists. The ads dismiss SDSM's criticism of the project as stemming from the party's "ideological-communist" mindset. The GoM ads claim that the church is simply a reconstruction of a church "needlessly" destroyed by the Yugoslav government following the 1963 earthquake, and that it will serve as a proud landmark for tourists and as Skopje's international symbol.

[1](#)3. (SBU) The primarily e-Albanian NGO "Wake Up" has filed a motion requesting the Constitutional Court to rule that the government is barred from funding the church under Article 19 of the constitution, which separates church and state. A ruling from the Court is not expected until fall. The site for the church is directly on or only meters away from (depending on who you ask) where Mother Theresa was born as well as the former site of the Burmali mosque, destroyed after the Ottomans left in 1914. (The GoM recently built a Mother Theresa house only a couple of hundred meters up the street, itself a prime example of architectural kitsch and a sore point for many e-Albanians.) A coalition of NGOs is not backing down from its request to rebuild the Burmali mosque,

and recently held a modest protest at the site. They plan to continue their efforts.

14. (SBU) The church issue had sat mostly dormant for many months, only to be revived by the March 29 incident and the apparent realization by opponents to the church (or at least to the use of government money to fund its construction) that VMRO was likely to press ahead following elections. The incident itself, which took place between the two rounds of elections, was ugly but hardly a melee. A small group of architecture students announced its intentions to protest the construction several days before, only to find themselves heavily outnumbered by a pro-church crowd. The police were apparently ill-prepared for this confrontation, which amounted to a few bumps and bruises (mostly inflicted by the "pro-church" people on the students) and appalling chants of "Shiptari, Shiptari" (an ugly epithet for "Albanians") by the "pro-church" people. (Very few if any of the students were actually e-Albanians.)

15. (SBU) Both VMRO and the opposition SDSM sought to seize on this unpleasant incident, trading mutual accusations. As usual for what passes as political dialogue here, the rhetoric was as outlandish and hysterical as it was unilluminating, for example SDSM's claim that the event was "the worst act of violence and terror (against) its citizens in its two decades of democratic history." Our analysis is that both parties had some role in the incident. Just how much a role is debatable, but VMRO's superior organizational skills were once again shown by its ability to bring out a larger, and nastier, crowd.

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DUI IN A BIND

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(6. (C) Gruevski's e-Albanian coalition partner, DUI, finds itself in a bind on this issue. Most of its constituents bitterly oppose construction of this church, and especially the use of taxpayer money to do so. (DUI leader Ali Ahmeti himself is believed to be a confirmed atheist.) DUI MP Ermira Mehmeti told us that she and many e-Albanians simply would no longer go to Skopje's main square should the church be built there. DUI is somewhat boxed in by a deal Gruevski struck last year with his then e-Albanian partner, DPA. Under this deal, the GoM was to proceed with funding the church but would also construct a mosque in Tetovo (ref a). Since then, the GoM proceeded with plans to build the church. (DUI's mayor in Tetovo -- since defeated by DPA -- blocked any mosque construction in Tetovo.) When DUI agreed to join the VMRO government following 2008 parliamentary elections, it apparently did not seek to overturn the previous GoM decision on the construction. It is not at all clear that Gruevski will listen to its complaints now.

17. (C) DUI pols have complained bitterly to us about the church construction, and are still sour about the VMRO government's 2002 construction of a huge (75 meters tall) lighted cross on Vodno mountain overlooking the capital. DUI VP Teuta Arifi said the use of government money for these projects is against the 2001 Ohrid Framework Agreement, apparently basing this belief on constitutional amendments (including to Article 19) prescribed by Ohrid which say, inter alia, that all religious communities and groups are "separate from the state and equal before the law."

18. (SBU) For their part, VMRO leaders hotly defend their commitment to this project, despite the GoM's recent decision to cut the state budget by 6.2% in response to decreased revenues due to poor economic growth. Indeed our analysis of the GoM's proposed budget re-balance shows an 18% cut for the Ministry of Defense, 7% for Interior and 3% for Education, while the Ministry of Culture ) which typically funds items such as statues, memorials, churches, etc gets a whopping 14% increase. Macedonia's Minister of Culture, Elizabeta

Kanceska-Milevska, has shown little interest in representing all citizens of Macedonia in the high-profile projects her ministry funds. Additionally, no one -- the Macedonian Orthodox Church, the Prime Minister's Chief of Staff, the Director of the GoM's Directorate on Religious Affairs -- seems to be able (or willing) to tell us how much the church will actually cost or what the government's share is.

¶9. (C) Gruevski's chief of staff, Martin Protoger, sharply retorted "Why not?" when we asked why this project was to proceed. He averred that VMRO, as a "conservative party," was well within its rights to promote such projects as part of its agenda. He professed not to understand why the e-Albanian community would oppose this, asserting that the GoM has paid to build and restore mosques as well as churches. VMRO MP (and one of the party's chief message-masters) Ilija Dimovski told us the GoM must sponsor such projects "to ensure the heritage and values of the Republic are preserved." He too said he could not understand why some would object.

#### CONSTITUTIONAL COURT WEIGHS IN

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¶10. (SBU) Debate over this issue has been sharpened even further by the Constitutional Court's April 15 ruling that the GoM's addition of religious education to the public school curriculum is unconstitutional. The Court has now overturned three VMRO initiatives: religious education, a law providing enhanced government subsidies to families who have more children in 43 municipalities of the country (40 of which were predominantly e-Macedonian, and only 3 predominantly e-Albanian), and "patriotic cash register receipts," which showed which part of any purchase were goods made in Macedonia.

¶11. (SBU) An enraged VMRO sputtered venom at the ruling, but Gruevski and his leadership grudgingly announced that the Court's ruling was binding and that the government would abide by it. However, the press reported April 29 that the Macedonian Orthodox Church, the Islamic Community of Macedonia, and the three other recognized religious bodies in the Inter-Religious Council would meet to discuss the matter and to consider proposing an amendment to enshrine religious education in the schools in the constitution. No doubt Gruevski -- who is close to the church and sees himself as its defender -- would happily support such an initiative.

¶12. (SBU) Critics point out that instead of inculcating religious and moral values, religious education threatens to divide Macedonia's two main communities even further, by

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highlighting another difference between e-Macedonians (predominantly Orthodox) and e-Albanians (predominantly Muslim). The President of Macedonia's main teachers' union recently told us that these courses are taught by clerics who are ill-trained and generally do not preach tolerance and understanding. The GoM also planned to offer an optional, less sectarian "history of religions" course, but it was only offered sporadically and the Ministry of Education never promulgated a curriculum or standards of learning for the course.

#### COMMENT: CULTURE WARS AT A DANGEROUS TIME

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¶13. (C) DUI polls and some other analysts here warn darkly that Macedonia's culture wars, combined with a deteriorating economy and no movement on the name issue (and thus the population's Euro-Atlantic aspirations), could set the country on a downward spiral of instability. Most e-Albanian politicians tell us they do not believe that a 2001-style insurrection is in the offing. Instead, they speculate that e-Albanians may in essence take their marbles and go home, demanding a confederation or another form of ethnically-based

self-government (a step expressly refuted by Ohrid). Recent comments in the Albanian-language media appeared to point in this direction. It is hard to know whether Gruevski would oppose this; after all, it would free him from even having to pay lip service to an e-Albanian government partner or to the community's aspirations as a whole. Still, eight years after the signing of the Ohrid Framework Agreement, it is jarring to even have to ask interlocutors if they believe Macedonia is more stable than it was in 2001.

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